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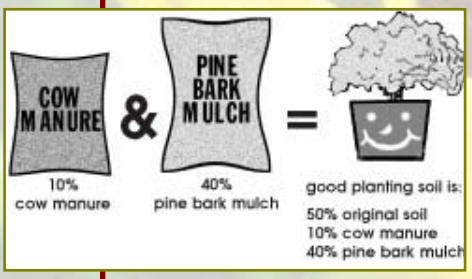
By Diane Meucci Sept/Oct 1993

PLANTING, MULCHING, MAINTENANCE

First and foremost, our clay soils don't drain well. They also don't accept water very well when they are dry. So, planting method that work well in other regions won't work so well here. To compensate, plant high. That is, dig a shallow, wide hole. Current research has shown there is no benefit in digging a deep hole. In fact, evidence shows that trees and shrubs root in primarily in surface soil. So, the wider the better.

Therefore, a 15-inch root ball, deep and wide, should have a hole 12 inches deep and 20-25 inches wide. Really!

The preferred soil amendment for the fine particle clay in our region is pine bark mulch (not nuggets or hardwood). Unlike peat moss, which is great for regions with sandy loam, pine bark mulch is a larger particle that opens up the soil so water can move freely in and out. Without it our soil rejects water when dry and becomes sodden when wet. (Wet muck or cement.)



When used in combination with native soil and composed manure (see diagram), you have created a perfect environment for a happy microbe growth aeration, drainage and nutrition. If you avoid chemical fertilizer you will also find our friend the worm will survive to till and fertilize.

If you are creating beds for planting, use the same amendments to a depth of 6-12 inches. This may require several passes with the tiller, adding 3 inches a time. (Or, use a shovel for a great aerobic workout. Another reason to plant in the cool of fall.)

Finally, if you have time and want to save money, you can mark your beds in September with landscape paint or chalk, or dig a small trench (3-6 inches) around the boundaries, at a 45-degree angle, and toss soil into the bed. Now, rake all of your fallen leaves into the beds, 6-12 inches deep if you plan to till, or 3-6 inches deep if they will be your permanent mulch. You can then plant, using the previously described method. For aesthetic reasons, and better stability as a mulch, collect your leaves and grass clippings - no seeds - with a bag attachment for your mower. Using leaves that have been processed through your mower or other suitable tools will save you money and labor annually. If you must have conventional mulch, you can use 1 inch instead of 3 inches on top of your pulverized leaves.

MULCHING

Use mulch as protection from heat and cold , as weed barrier and as an eventual fertilizer-soil amendment.

Mulch goes on top of prepared beds and should be applied annually, in the fall or spring as follows:

1 inch of shredded hardwood mulch
lasts 2-3 years, is beautiful and will not erode. Great for slopes. It is toxic to plants when mixed into soil.

2-3 inches of pine needles
lasts 2 years, is beautiful and will not erode. It can be had for little labor and is now also available in bales. Great for slopes.

2-3 inches of pine bark mulch (no nuggets)
is for level areas only and where you will annually dig, such as for annuals or perennials. Is is pretty, a great soil amendment and lasts 1-2 years.

3-6 inches of pulverized leaves
(need not necessarily be pulverized if used in beds around trees and shrubs). Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and, to me, this is beautiful because it is recycling at its best. For formal gardens or gardens close to the house, you can add conventional mulch (hardwood) one inch deep. Renew each year and save the labor of raking, toting and bagging leaves, as well as the cost of conventional mulch.

Trees and shrubs planted directly into the lawn need a large, wide ring of mulch 3-6 inches deep. do not cover the rootball more than an inch. (Grass releases a chemical that inhibits tree growth and must be kept at a distance for maximum vitality and growth of the tree or shrub.) The mulch also keeps the tree away from danger of a weed whip or lawn edger.

FERTILIZATION

Use composed manure, seaweed or fish emulsion.

February 15th, follow directions on container.

April 15th, follow directions on container.

September 15th, use half as much as spring feedings.

If you must use chemical fertilizer, use a time release, well balanced fertilizer 14-7-7 or 18-6-12. The first number is nitrogen which our soil needs. The other numbers are phosphorus and potassium which we have lots of, so the first number should always be the highest. Do not use 13-13-13 or Ammonium Nitrate. The are not balanced and can burn plants. Also they pollute more because they are needed more often - every 2 weeks compared to every 6 months to 2 years for time release fertilizer.

WATERING

Just because it rained out your picnic, or it rains every Saturday, or it is cloudy, it does not mean we had a lot of rain.

Once established, many plants (most of the plants I will recommend) can survive (not necessarily flourish), with little water.

OPTIONS:

Drip irrigation: Slow, even distribution. Economical, easy to install and repair, 3/8-inch hose is best, though often you will find 5/8-inch hose because the distributors believe that is what you want. However, it tends to flood. With 5/8-inch, water 4 hours on, 6 hours off, for a total of 24 hours.

Hand Watering: Using a "Watering Wand" or a hose with no nozzle, water the root ball and surrounding hold until it floods. Move on to all your young plants and then repeat the entire process. (Once a week is enough if you are thorough.) Use this time for peaceful reflection. Turn off the phone and family.

Sprinklers: The only reason I hesitate to recommend sprinklers is that they waste much water and we tend to turn them off after 20 minutes because the lawn is flooded. But the mulch in the beds is hardly damp.
Use your fingers to check moisture in beds.

In our nursery we use twenty or so overhead oscillating sprinklers. They run about 100$ a piece, including timers, pipe and hoses. Please ask us for our 'rigging n' diggin' flyer or download from our web site.

Enjoy! This is about pleasure.

A Nursery Inside A Garden

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